

FIRST FRUITS OF DAYTON

The Intellectual Evolution in Dixie

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THE South, with its old traditions and new blood, with its ancient and leisurely culture and its new and booming industries, is now at the point of recovering from the Civil War and the greater blight of Reconstruction. Since October of last year, THE FORUM has published articles interpreting the "New South" to the nation at large. And in this final article of the Southern Series Mr. Donald Davidson of Vanderbilt University sums up the intellectual situation and presents the Dayton episode in a new light.

vast schemes of public education which will prepare the way for the heresies that Fundamentalism thought to check. They knew nothing of his great programme of improvements in state administration. They could not think of him as he really was — a grave, hard-working man with a dogged conscientiousness that chilled politicians to the bone.

Such an instance is but one of many that might be cited to show the risk of generalizing on intellectual progress in the South. But a great many writers have taken the risk during the past few years, with an innocent abandon which has produced bewilderingly various results. Their discussions range all the way from denunciation and satire to boastful symposia which detail the surprising phenomena of the New South in terms of such physical and cashable matters as water power, climate, mineral resources, and cheap labor. They are bitter, or they are enthusiastic. And all are right, yet all are wrong, for all have fallen into the easy mistake of simplification.

People do not like to think, of course, that the truth may be more sober and complex than a story in the *New York Times* or an editorial in the *Nation* would encourage them to believe. They prefer a simple myth to a complicated truth. Let Mr. Mencken announce that Tennesseans worship a God with whisks, and his statement becomes gospel because it offers a dogma

WHEN Austin Peay died not long ago during his third successive term as Governor of Tennessee, editorial writers were inclined to base his epitaph upon a single item of his career. He had signed the anti-evolution law, and therefore he surely must have been an enemy of what many well-intentioned gentlemen are pleased to call progress. They did not stop to remember that Peay had promulgated

with the catchiness and news value dear to the American heart. In the sixties the Abolitionists did not find it hard to convince people that Southern gentlemen habitually flogged a Negro or two before breakfast. In 1918 it was equally simple to persuade Americans that Germans were baby eaters. We are always ready to entertain exciting notions when they require no mental labor more than believing the worst of our neighbors. And to-day a Southerner, emboldened to make the retort courteous, might ask whether he is invited to judge the East by the activities of the Watch and Ward Society of Boston, the Middle West by the zealotry of Mayor Thompson, or the Far West by the delicate maneuvers of Aimee Semple McPherson. But this process of charge and countercharge is ungracious and sterile. It obscures the real issues.

The difficulty of understanding the South is increased by the very variety of conditions in this section. Here, by and large, are the mingled phenomena of a period of transition. The earlier reconstruction, which was literally concerned with building up what had been torn down, has not ended; it has only passed into an advanced stage in which powerful economic forces, destined strongly to affect Southern life and thought, have freer play than ever. Hence the South is thickly sown with contradictions.

Gaudy filling stations edge their way among ancestral mansions. The Du Ponts build a rayon factory a few miles from the ancient residence of Andrew Jackson. North Carolina harbors (or has harbored) journalists as different as Gerald Johnson and Josephus Daniels. Atlanta produces Coca Cola and Frances Newman. The churches of Nashville unite for revival services under Billy Sunday or Gypsy Smith; and later Nashville entertains the annual convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Tennessee contains both Vanderbilt University, with its modern laboratories and independent spirit of culture, and the newly founded Bryan Memorial University. Think of Cole Blease and Carter Glass, Jim Heffin and Oscar Underwood, Pastor Norris and Dr. Poteat, magnolias and billboards, colonial mansions and real estate developments, paved roads and pig tracks, horse races and Methodist conferences — and you have symbols that are a rebuke to quick conclusions.

Furthermore, the South is geographically and socially diverse. Grant that there is a distinct Southern tradition and a solidarity among the states; there are also marked differences. Southern

tradition itself includes historically not only the genial, aristocratic ideal of leisure that belonged to the Old South, but also the more restless, democratic tradition of the frontier, embodied in "Old Hickory," and still far from moribund. Alabama is not like Kentucky, Tennessee not like South Carolina. The spirit of Charleston or Richmond is not the spirit of Birmingham and Atlanta. The mountain people of North Carolina and East Tennessee are not the same as the folk of the Delta country; the tidewater Virginians are but distant cousins of the bluff Texans.

THE VALUE OF FUNDAMENTALISM

If we remember these facts, and if we admit, too, the healthy Jeffersonian conception that anything *can* happen and probably *ought* to happen in a democratic state, we shall not use up all our grave concern for anti-evolution laws and Ku Klux outrages as having major meanings in themselves. What meaning they have is more relevant to the general state of society and government in America than to the special condition of the South alone. Anti-evolution legislation may even be taken as a kind of progress; for it signifies that Fundamentalism has appealed an issue of battle — already lost elsewhere — to law-making bodies, and that sort of appeal is characteristic of the American idea that law can effect what society in its inner workings cannot.

Or consider, too, that Fundamentalism, whatever its wild extravagances, is at least morally serious in a day when morals are treated with levity; and that it offers a sincere, though a narrow, solution to a major problem of our age: namely, how far science, which is determining our physical ways of life, shall be permitted also to determine our philosophy of life. No matter what the degree of pessimism in which we indulge our souls, we shall not do well to neglect considerations like these; and the longer we look, the more reasons we find for distrusting those scornful ones who cry, "Out, damned spot!" without knowing very much about the seat of infection.

The Fundamentalists, for example, argued with genuine moral fervor that they were out to save the younger generation, but they did not inquire whether the younger generation wanted to be saved. The younger generation, in fact, seems to be tending away from the kind of salvation that Fundamentalism proposes, and such matters as the Dayton flurry hastened rather than checked their apostasy. It is not merely that students in colleges

and universities — where one naturally expects to find the forward fringes of intellectual progress — are being systematically exposed to the heresies of scientific and literary courses. The mental temper of the young gentlemen (and the young ladies, by all means!) is alert and quite sensitive, almost too joyously responsive, indeed, to what might be called alien influences. They are familiar with the pages and the preaching of liberal Northern journals. They are, for better or worse, much inveigled by the jeremiads of Mr. Mencken, and are often led to imitate him. They have read Mr. Cabell and Mr. Sinclair Lewis. They have fished in strange waters of sociology and economics. Many of them have brushed against the philosophers from Plato to Dewey.

The evidence will be found in their magazines, even the ostensibly comic sheets. These practise a sophisticated, thoroughly modern tone. They have a dashing, sometimes a recklessly critical spirit. They are likely to sandwich well-seasoned book reviews among college jokes and prepare state and local versions of the *Mercury's* "Americana." And there are also the debating teams, which go up and down the country, arguing with fine tolerance any side of dubious questions like prohibition and war — sometimes viewed with suspicion, but generally finding an audience. These, of course, are leaders and minorities. The great mass of college students doubtless remain intent on football now and good jobs eventually; but in these respects they are like college students everywhere.

The whole matter of education comes into the reckoning. The physical growth of institutions is important, though it is unspectacular and therefore not greatly advertised. We may take comfort in the creation — or re-creation — of Duke University, with its endowment of millions. We may recall that Chancellor Kirkland's answer to the Dayton episode was to build new laboratories on the Vanderbilt campus. We may rejoice in the press, the *Journal of Social Sciences*, the notable activities of the University of North Carolina. We may observe with interest the amazing growth of George Peabody College for Teachers, realizing its greatness among institutions of its kind and knowing the vast influence it is having on common school education in the South. Whatever education can do, it will presently have an opportunity to do in the South. Anti-evolution statutes are straw barriers against a great wind.

But we go astray if we dwell merely on the facts of mass educa-

tion, which, after all, may be questioned on principle anywhere. It is far more important to realize that Southern educational institutions are the nuclei from which ideas work outward, impregnating the commonwealth of social thought. From them come editors, preachers, statesmen, and especially writers, for the student of the literary revival of the South must be keenly aware that Southern colleges and universities have been a great source of creative activity. Remember that Paul Green is a professor of philosophy at the University of North Carolina, that Edwin Mims and John Crowe Ransom are professors of English at Vanderbilt University; and you have an indication of resident spiritual forces that outweigh all the statistics of literacy or illiteracy that you may wish to compile.

It is the quality of intellectual progress, however, not formidable arrays of figures, that we should consider most attentively. Go into almost any department of Southern life, and you can make out a case for progress as easily as for backwardness, although you must do so with considerable assumptions as to the kind of progress that is being illustrated. I might discourse at length on liberal religious leaders like Bishop Mouzon, Dr. Wilmer, Bishop Maxon. I might list the progressive editors — Julian Harris, Grover C. Hall, Louis Jaffe, George Fort Milton, Douglas Freeman, James I. Finney, and others; or “point with pride” to the campaign of the *Birmingham News* against the Alabama floggers; or exhibit the work of T. H. Alexander of the *Nashville Tennessean*, whose widely syndicated column, “I Reckon So,” gets in a bantering, humorous criticism of Southern life far more valuable than astringent gentlemen could effect. (In the South, said Alexander recently, there are Four Horsemen who rove the land with evil tread — the clergyman, the lawyer, the newspaper, the banker.)

I might write a whole essay on the progress of Southern literature, dealing with the activity of literary centres — Charleston with its Poetry Society of South Carolina, Nashville with its *Fugitive* group, Richmond with its *Reviewer* coterie, New Orleans, Dallas, and so on. There would be a vast list of Southern authors to catalogue who have gone into the ranks of the literary elect — Cabell, Heyward, Ransom, Stribling, Roberts, and many more. I could dwell on the movement toward de-sentimentalization among these writers, the prevalence of a “modern” tone, the gingerly step with which they approach the Southern scene.

Finally, I could survey Southern opinion itself, showing that it is more self-critical and approachable than it used to be, and give as one illustration the popularity of Edwin Mims's book, *The Advancing South*, which ran through several editions, was syndicated in various Southern newspapers, and reached — to judge from vehement expressions of praise and disagreement — a host of people whom outside criticism never touches.

WHITHER PROGRESS?

But all such exhibits are mere preliminaries to the real question, which is: Grant that the South is making progress, is apparently going to have progress forced on it, whether it will or no, what is the essential nature of that progress? Whose ideal of progress is the South to follow? The ideal of Mr. Mencken, if he has one? Of Mr. Oswald Garrison Villard? Of Mr. Walter Lippmann? Of the late Judge Gary? Of the Merchants and Manufacturers Association? With so much advice offered gratis, the South can take its time and pick and choose. It has long been conservative. It has kept its old ways of life intact. It has clung stubbornly to traditions which have given it definite character. In this time of change it can and ought to be deliberate. Whatever the South may find to emulate in the example of other sections of the United States, it may also find mistakes to avoid. But deliberate selectiveness is impossible without proper leaders. And the two principles that are the core of the whole matter are these: first, the great intellectual problem of the South to-day is to find leaders and to follow them; and second, only that ideal of progress is justified which affirms and does not destroy the local individuality and true characteristics of the South.

The leaders must come from the South itself, and not from the "outside." I greatly fear that Northern criticism, which has in the main done little more than shout about ignorance and foolishness, has overshot itself and is of doubtful value in the present situation. The critic who begins his analysis with a flogging or a lynching may be on the side of the right, but he often misses his mark because he reasons from insufficient data or misplaces his emphasis. Southerners who try the same rôle accomplish more, but they are likely to fall into a purely critical attitude which is as dangerous as the old habit of belligerent apologetics. The South has had enough criticism to give it a healthy distrust of itself. But if distrust goes far enough, it becomes unhealthy. It is

not good for any nation or part of a nation to lose its self-respect. Just now the South needs the declarative, interpreting eye of the sympathetic student, not the lashing tongue of the scold.

The task of the leaders of Southern thought is as much to interpret the South to itself as it is to distribute the various doctrines of sweetness and light that are being offered by excited spectators. Once we had in the South — and still have, to a large extent — a tradition of repose and *noblesse oblige*, ways of quiet, cultured life not surpassed anywhere. But what will happen to that tradition before the modern doctrine which insists that progress is novelty, is energy, is quantity? Once we had romantic notions about the beauty and goodness of woman, and we even believed in God and good manners. Now we are offered biology, behaviorism, a handful of fossils, a tabloid newspaper, Mencken's essay on the liver as the seat of artistic inspiration, the opinions of Arthur Brisbane, the vague, elusive thing called liberalism. Why should we not be slow to change? Why should we not search for certain accommodations? Surely it is the business of Southern leaders not merely to be progressive, but to study how to adapt the ways of progress to certain peculiarities of the Southern people which do not yet deserve to perish from the earth.

It is strange that the critics of the South have rarely if ever noted where the strategic key to the situation lies. We may as well be realists. The key is in the hands of the business men. They are the lords and masters of the industrial expansion which is the chief fact about the modern South, and they wield the balance of power here as elsewhere. Even the rural population, long unmanageable, yields to the sway of dividends when Kraft cheese factories and water power syndicates invade the countryside. Reconstruction made it respectable for a man to earn money by trade, and now the blood of the Cavaliers (as well as the canny Scots) promotes real estate subdivisions or manufactures a product with a fancy name — sometimes, perhaps, a little ashamed, secretly, of the vulgarities required.

The situation is not as new as it seems. Colonial Virginia was mercantile before it adopted the genteel tradition of its Cavaliers — a minority who set the tone for the majority of the population. The South has never blushed to acknowledge that the good life has its foundation in economic matters. But the plantation masters of old days and even the factory builders of the late nineteenth century mixed a considerable amount of civic re-

sponsibility and generous paternalism with their business affairs. The Southern business men of to-day seem to be out of touch with this tradition. Their public activities tend to be limited to the familiar process of boosting the home town, or to minor civic enterprises like widening a street or supporting the community chest. Privately they look after their own interests. They will talk to the government, if it needs any talking to, and, through their agencies such as the Merchants and Manufacturers Association, they will exert a strong negative and repressive power on persons who come out with dangerous or heretical doctrines. Above all, behind their genial front is a determined, though not consciously formulated, policy of aggrandizement. They are ready to egg on their industrial revolution enthusiastically without ever counting the evils they may be dragging in with it, and without considering whether they are hurrying the South into an artificial prosperity.

It is in their power to cast the deciding vote in the matter of intellectual progress. They can, if they wish, inhibit free expression. They can be the bogey looking over the shoulder of the editor, who wonders if what he is writing will offend the Chamber of Commerce and the local advertisers. They can agitate for the repression of unorthodox journalistic views, as they did in Atlanta when a "colyumist" talked freely about the Sacco-Vanzetti affair, and as they have done in other and similar cases when somebody spoke out frankly. When burning issues arise, as in the Dayton unpleasantness, they can stand aside, with a don't-mix-in-politics attitude, although when child-labor legislation comes along, they do mix in politics with quiet, thorough-going coöperation. In short, they can make the efforts of all other leaders ineffective, by simply taking no interest in ideas or by being suspicious of them. In their behalf it must be said that the whole code of modern business in America does not encourage them to consider a definition of progress or to be very social-minded.

On the other hand, the mere presence of a few business men will make any cause respectable, whether it be an imitation of Gridiron Club frolics or a campaign for a stadium or an art museum. Whenever they have chosen to act in positive ways (and they often have), the results have been an impressive forecast of what can be accomplished when power and ideas work together. Under their touch art takes courage and independent

opinion thrives. In Atlanta, there is grand opera. In Nashville a symphony orchestra enters its eighth season, and a beautiful replica of the Parthenon arises, to serve no use but beauty. In other cities libraries are built, or a progressive minister is sustained. A Birmingham newspaper victoriously assails the Ku Klux Klan. The "colyumist's" writings are retained in his home city, day in and day out, despite criticism, and are syndicated in many cities. A vocal genius is given a musical education and goes to the Metropolitan. A poetry magazine is supported by retail merchants. A university endowment is increased. These things have happened when business men give aid; and they should happen more often, for this is the way of salvation, and it is sad to see the business men and the intellectuals often in apparently hostile camps, where each side suspects the other of deviltries unmentionable.

INTELLECTUAL DRY ROT

But there are certain reasons for not blaming the business men and others who have not been attracted by intellectual issues. The weakness of the liberal cause is its lack of flavor, which is the result of its dry insistence on purely intellectual things. Look where you will — in politics, religion, literature — liberals fear emotion, as much as Satan himself, without realizing that they cannot make reason and the will of God prevail until they instill a little emotion into the process. The souls of men refuse to be stirred by logarithmic arrangements of ideas, and even the admirable editorials of a liberal like Herbert Croly leave a poor sinner a little cold. The leaders of intellectual progress in the South — whether they be novelists, teachers, dramatists — may use all the reason they want in reaching their conclusions, but they overlook the possibilities of their audience if they can make no emotional appeal.

And that appeal, for the Southerner as for others, begins with his homeland, to which he may well turn with a lump in his throat and yet not put logic and truth aside. The South has been damned for its provincialism, but there never was a time when the South needed its provincialism more — if by provincialism is meant its heritage of individual character, the whole bundle of ways that make the South Southern. The South needs to keep its provincialism (it can be both detached and generous) if only as a balance against the feverish cosmopolitanism affected in some

other sections. Some little spirit of disunity and retirement might be a boon, as a refuge against the cruel conformity ordered by our always accelerating, standardizing civilization.

The South is asked to remold itself! In whose image, then, and after what heart's desire? What problems are to be visited upon the South, what strikes, agitations, nervous retchings of society, wage slavery, graft, mountebankery, idiocies of merchant princes? No, give the South leave first to discover its virtues as other sections have discovered theirs. For the progress that comes through disruption and haste is not always a civilized thing.

A Southerner visits New York, let us say, as Southerners do. He boards the train at Charleston, leaving behind the marshes with wild birds and deer, the trees heavy with moss, the close, white-fronted houses — a quiet land, gracious and full of ancient peace. He passes the sandy flats, the pines and turpentine camps, the cotton fields, presently the greener country with its different soil, and then the rolling fields and variegated hills of Virginia, where are houses placid, old in generous traditions. Not even yet is it a thickly settled country. There is ugliness around the railroad stations, but not much elsewhere until Washington is passed, and then come the miles of slums, factories, railroads, a hopeless wreck of the soil, a triumph of ugliness until one plunges into the bowels of the earth and, issuing breathless, feels on his temples the roar of New York.

THE NEW SOUTH AND THE OLD

To contend that there are different ways of progress is not to be a foe to progress. The Southerner who takes such a journey may well ask himself what sort of progress he is going in for. To make Charleston over into the precise image of Pittsburgh would be a crime worse than the Dayton crime. Those who advocate progress without any positive regard for the genius of the South may presently find themselves in the unenviable company of the carpet-baggers and scalawags of the first reconstruction. They shall be as persons without a country — barren and importunate exiles — dwelling in a land that loves them not, that they have helped to kill.

Does such a view of the situation imply that there is a special kind of progress, different from other kinds, which the South ought to make its own? The answer is yes — it must be yes, so

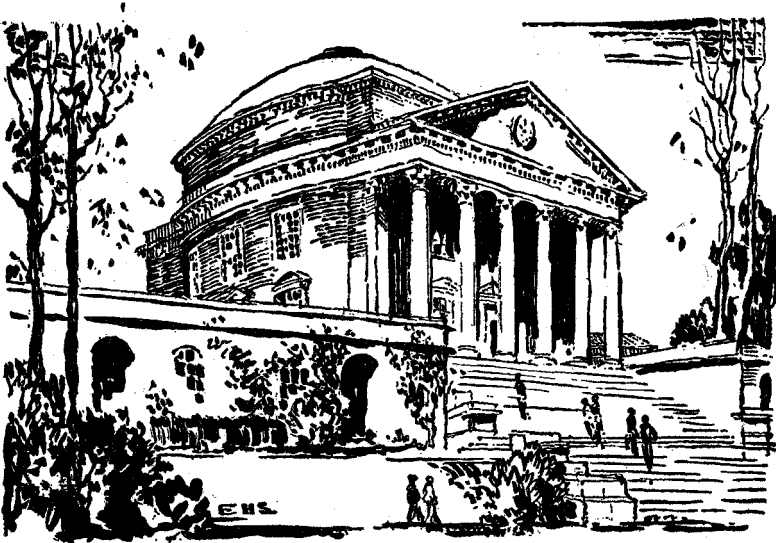
long as the individuality of the South is a living thing, affirmed by the very vehemence of the critics who make its case a special case; so long as its character and heritage have anything valuable to contribute to the term American. The doctrine of States Rights has long been politically submerged, and shows little prospect of being raised to life. Spiritually, it is more important than ever; for while we live under the blessings of national unity, we must take care that unity does not become uniformity. In the day of standardization we have the moral obligation to discover the uses of variety, which is an aid to the good life in New England, the South, or anywhere you will. There is more than political truth in the Wilsonian word, *self-determination*; it is a fair mixture of differences that makes a tolerable harmony.

Thus provincialism means, not sectionalism, not insularity and bigotry of mind, but differentiation, which is a thoroughly ancient and honorable and American idea. And as Matthew Arnold was unable to define the grand style much further than to say it was the style used by grand poets, I should hesitate to say more than that the progress recommended to Southerners ought to be a Southern progress. It would be with danger hastily superimposed, but it ought to arrive naturally — and, in accordance with Southern character, slowly — from within. General and universal items of progress, such as modern education, religious tolerance, political liberalism, should be sought as a matter of course, like improved sanitation and good farm machinery; and in these things the South would be foolish not to accept intelligent guidance wherever it can be found.

But in the more particular items of progress, a man would be bold indeed who would offer, as for Southerners only, an exact and systematic prescription. One can readily see, however, that the social heritage of the South ought naturally and unconsciously to modify the course of progress — intellectual and material — if only the mind of the South can develop a wise self-reliance. Thus we can imagine a Southern industrialism, somewhat affected by elder ideals, that would be not wholly utilitarian in its philosophy and conduct. Or a clergy who could be liberal and yet command the fire and earnestness that the Modernists have left to be monopolized by their narrower-minded brethren. Or writers who could be in touch with all that is new in art and letters without ever allowing their own native character, idiom, consciousness of place to be obscured in their interpretations of the South —

writers with positive Southern warmth and good humor rather than the painful acidity that passes for sophistication.

In short, the progress of the South deserves to be organic. It can be genuine progress only when, in the best sense of the word, it is growth. And as growth means improvement of what you have, not mere addition or change, the first step toward progress is for the South to turn back upon itself, to rediscover itself, to examine its ideals, to evaluate the past with reference to the present, and the present with reference to the past. We need to reaffirm the principle which Mr. Stark Young so happily ascribed to the University of Virginia — “a habit of allowing men to ripen of themselves and the vitality natural to their characters to achieve the growth implicit in it.” For only thus can we retain “the old fragrance of civilization, which arose from public graces and a desire for those forms of moral beauty in which men may live best, not only to themselves, but in some sort of society together.”



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